

**Sermon Notes for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011**

[Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18](#) / [Psalm 119:33-40](#) / [1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23](#) / [Matthew 5:38-48](#)

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I have encountered many ways to interpret today's Gospel passage over the years. One suggests that in some societies, people strike with one hand and bless with the other – to turn the other cheek invites a touch with the opposite hand of striking – that is, to invite a blessing. Carrying the coat an extra mile is not simply being extra generous when asked a favor – it can also be understood as subversive. Roman soldiers were known to ask peasants of occupied countries to carry their heavy garments. Imagine being asked by an occupying soldier to carry his armor for him to the next village a mile up the road. Then imagine his exasperation when you carried it two miles up the road instead.

Sociologists have described Jesus' historical world as "agonistic" – a world very much like some places still today in the Middle East where honor is the primary value. What does that mean? It generally assumes there's a limited amount of honor to go around, and the worldview turns every neighbor, every person standing on every street corner a potential enemy ready to rob you – generally the only "you" that matters in an agonistic society is male – of your honor. The result? Enemies abound, and blood feuds are common. That the Mosaic law ordered "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" is not a permissive statement for revenge, but a limiting one that keeps the blood feuds in check.

Jesus goes one step further and teaches his disciples to check out of the honor-shame system all together. To allow your enemy to hit you without striking back begged the attention of the wider community, ended the feud before it started, and left the door open for reconciliation. It's harder to ascertain exactly what Jesus is getting at when he invites lending and giving freely to a largely cashless, agrarian culture like his. Our entire economic system, by way of contrast, is built on lending capital – trillions of dollars change hands or adjust their value on a daily basis in our world largely in the complex, virtual worlds of computer systems, exchanges, or ledgers. But to give generously and freely has always built up community in a way that no formal redistributive system, whether government taxes or communalism or socialism can.

In this sea of interpretation, one thing is clear, Jesus' call to his followers in the first century rings down to ours with unnerving clarity – his followers, Christians, are called to be counter-cultural. And counter-cultural movements are dangerous, unpredictable, and often vulnerable. A few of our members may recall the days when families left Church of Our Saviour in protest because the rector went to Selma to participate in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. Sooner or later, Jesus' alternative community to societies both historical and contemporary -- societies built on consumption, wealth, and might -- finds itself in the uncomfortable position of being a minority voice of apparent foolishness in the face of the worldly wisdom of the age.

We are left with uncomfortable questions this day about our own participation in a capitalistic system that depends on the flow of natural resources often protected by a massively powerful military; on goods and services made cheap by the desperate labor of workers abroad or the undocumented alien living nearby; on a justice and political system that for all our efforts can still be bought and paid for by the highest bidder. And this is not a liberal critique of a conservative patriotic worldview, nor an attack on our imperfect democracy that holds some ideals, at least, that I imagine Jesus would have supported. It's much more complex and difficult. After all, we were faced this week with an ostensibly liberal president offering a budget that strived to cut future government deficits by curtailing services to the most impoverished among us. Pragmatism – what Paul might regard as the “wisdom of this world” – leaves all of us involved in subtle and overt injustice, indifference, and violence. Our challenge in today's gospel is not merely to figure out a way to leverage our political clout as a people for the least among us, but to live in tangible ways into the new way of relationship, the new way of community Jesus demands – to be conscientious subversives in whatever context we find ourselves.

Jesus tells us, his followers, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” That's enough by itself to get us into trouble given the perfectionism of the part of the world we live in. What Jesus means by “perfect” might better be translated to us as “whole, holy, complete,” the antithesis of all in our world that divides, profanes, and undermines our humanity created in the image of God. Jesus knows it's complicated. His followers in the first century probably could barely fathom what he meant by turning the other cheek or refraining from vengeance, particularly when the honor of those they most dearly loved was on the line. But the call is still there to make us uncomfortable – uncomfortable enough, perhaps, to find the actions that really make a difference for the Gospel, for one another, for the future.

The experience of The Episcopal Church (once a bastion of the status quo in the American context) in our growing involvement with the Civil Rights era reconstructed and recovered a missing part of our Christian identity. We ended up adding that part to the end of our baptismal covenant where we promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” We've been in trouble off and on ever since not only with the external world but within the body of contemporary Christianity. Rather than a defender of the status quo, we have become counter-cultural, a little bit dangerous, a little bit unpredictable, a little bit vulnerable.

Everything from our relationship with our next door neighbor to our political, financial, and career decisions gets put on the table in the light of our baptismal vows and, by extension, today's gospel teaching. I invite you to weigh that in your life and ministry this week. Instead of accepting the easy autopilot of work or habit, the easy out of wringing our hands and doing nothing, pray instead. . .pray for the guidance of Jesus' teaching today in decisions small and great, and embrace again what it means to reach for the completion, the holiness, the perfection that God holds for you. . .and not for you alone, but for the entire human family and all creation, yearning as we all still are, to be free of the systemic violence that blights our lives and communities, to be truly free, and to be made whole.